



## Fresh Faces in the Principal's Office

New Leaders program trains administrators to turn around failing schools.

By Jennifer Mendelsohn

**It's 9:00 on a Wednesday** morning and Principal Stacy Place is on the move at William Paca Elementary school in East Baltimore's McElderry Park. Fresh from a meeting with the school's mental health counselor—one of Paca's students witnessed

a parent being shot the previous night—the coffee-fueled administrator briskly walks the halls, making her daily checks on each classroom.

She shouts encouragement to a parent volunteer counting bananas for the morning snack, peruses a fifth grader's writing assignment on monuments, tucks in an errant uniform shirt, and watches the pre-kindergarteners practice the "sn" sound in snake—accepting a surreptitious hug or two in the process.

The hallways echo with the fast-paced clatter of Place's shoes: fashionably pointy-toed flowered pumps with eye-catching hot pink heels.

"We'll see how long they last," says Place, 32, a petite dynamo of a woman whose rapid-fire delivery bears unmistakable traces of her native Queens. "By 1:30, I usually have to take them off to chase somebody."

All in a (12-hour) day's work for a Baltimore public school principal.

Place is one of 65 current Baltimore city public school administrators who have graduated from New Leaders, an innovative training program designed to groom and support a new breed of leadership for troubled urban public schools. New Leaders, which started in New York

**Stacy Place, a New Leaders graduate and principal at William Paca Elementary School.**

and expanded to Baltimore and other cities in 2005, uses an intense, focused curriculum to create administrators capable of turning around failing urban schools in the era of “No Child Left Behind,” with its singular focus on student achievement and delivering demonstrable, measurable results.

William Paca is exactly the kind of school New Leaders graduates are trained for: poor—with 99 percent of the 630 students coming from families that qualify for free and reduced-price lunch—and academically underachieving. In 2003, only 24 percent of Paca’s fifth graders scored proficient or advanced on the Maryland State Assessment (MSA) in math. By contrast, during Place’s first three years at Paca, that number hit 95 percent.

So, why focus on principals?

“Teachers make it happen, but principals help create the conditions by which teachers do their job,” explains New Leaders’ Maryland executive director Donald Fennoy, himself a former principal who successfully transformed a Charlotte, NC, high school in such dire straits it was once accused by a judge of committing “academic genocide.” “There is no organization that doesn’t have great leaders,” he added. “If you don’t have a great quarterback, you’re not winning no Super Bowl.”

Since it came to Baltimore, New Leaders—which is funded by a mix of foundation grants, corporate and individual donations, and government monies—has become an entrenched part of the school system. Today, about 20 percent of the

city’s public school principals are graduates. As a whole, the organization estimates it currently affects some 25,000 Baltimore city students.

And the results are showing. For three years running, New Leaders’ data shows that their schools have out-performed the city-wide average on the Maryland State Assessment tests. Last year, three of the top 10 gaining schools in the city—those with the biggest jumps in MSA scores from the previous year—were helmed by New Leaders.

**“It’s not just about tests, but what to do when a parent comes in your building high and cusses you out.”**

PART ELITE TALENT SEARCH, PART BOOT CAMP, New Leaders is somewhat similar to Teach for America, the program that recruits motivated candidates to bypass extended graduate programs in education and fill teaching positions in low-income communities.

Traditionally, principals receive their certification via an academic program in school administration, but New Leaders allows interested educators a free alternative. Although candidates must already hold a master’s degree and pass the required state exams, New Leaders is accredited by the Maryland State Department of Education to certify principals, making it the only institution in the state—and one of the first in the coun-

try—that can do so without being a college or university.

Teachers must have at least three years experience to apply to the program and, nationally, only about 7 percent are ultimately accepted. Those accepted get their feet wet with training seminars, screening tests, and expanded administrative responsibilities. Then, they complete an intensive four-week summer course at Boston University taught by leaders in the field. The following year is an in-house residency at a Baltimore city school, shadowing current administrators. During that year, candidates attend weekly meetings to hone and focus their work, as well as three week-long seminars.

“We put you through the ringer,” says Fennoy, noting the rigorous nature of the program. “It’s like getting a master’s degree in a year.”

New Leaders does not guarantee jobs, but claims a placement rate of over 90 percent. Once candidates become principals, the support continues. The program assigns new principals experienced coaches to guide them, and members frequently reach out to one another for support, providing a crucial network for sharing resources and collective problem-solving.

“I don’t know if I should say this, but we always say it’s like a cult,” says Place, who calls the experience “life-changing,” with a laugh. “It’s kind of like a sorority. A fellow graduate will say, ‘I know someone in Memphis who can help,’ and they will drop everything to give you what you need.”

Many are drawn to New Leaders because of its hand-on approach, which stresses practical, real-world application over abstract theory.

"I went to school for leadership," says Damia Thomas, who went through the program in the 2008-09 school year and now serves as the principal of Harford Heights Elementary School. "But the training I received from New Leaders surpassed that. By far."

Thomas characterizes her academic experience as: "Take a class. Read a book. Write a paper," lapsing into a slow, lifeless monotone. In New Leaders, "everyone is like this," she says with a snap of her fingers. "It kept you on your toes."

It's an apt preparation since principals at urban schools seem to spend much of their time on their toes. With minimal resources, they juggle an almost mind-boggling array of non-academic crises while trying to conquer the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic. A day on the job might involve learning that a teenaged student had given birth alone in her room the prior night, as Donald Fennoy once discovered. Or having to hold classes in a building so dilapidated that the windows are literally falling out, sometimes on students, as one Baltimore principal does.

The New Leaders program is designed to harness and develop precisely the qualities that make principals successful in the very rarified atmosphere of urban schools, skills that go way beyond mere smarts.

"It's not just about the rubric and can you pass these tests," explains Fennoy. "It's, 'What are you going to do when this parent comes in your building high and

cusses you out? How are you going to manage that?' Because there's no book that teaches you about that. And that's going to be a reality of your work."

"New Leaders is where the rubber meets the road," agrees Dr. Lionel Jackson, the principal of Augusta Fells Savage Institute of Visual Arts, who mentored a New Leaders resident principal last year. "They know exactly what it takes to be a successful administrator, especially in an urban environment. That's a different breed of cat."

Indeed. For urban principals, even something as seemingly innocuous as attendance can be a major issue. They can't simply assume that kids in tough neighborhoods are going to come to school because they're supposed to. Stacy Place has been known to unapologetically pull students out of their homes in pajamas.

"It definitely makes the work more challenging," she says of these sorts of issues. "But we know that *is* the work, so that can't be an excuse."

Although some in the Baltimore City Public Schools were initially wary of the New Leaders program as an outsider effort, the program has impressed observers in the system with its high-achieving talent pool, its cutting-edge resources, and its relentless determination to zero in on exactly what works—and what doesn't—to improve student outcomes in failing schools.

Dr. Sonja Brookins Santelises, city schools' chief academic officer, says New Leaders gives its mission the urgency it deserves.

"They approach the work of urban school leadership as if it's the most important work they can be doing, worthy

of our best and most strategic thinking," she says. "You say, 'Wow! They're talking about leaders for schools with poor kids? I would have thought they were talking about schools for kids of diplomats.' That's the rigor they bring to it."

The city is currently exploring how it might create its own leadership development program "informed" by the New Leaders model, says Santelises.

For its part, New Leaders is anything but threatened by the possibility that the city might take the leadership pipeline into its own hands. "I'm good for right now. Trust me," says Fennoy with a laugh. "There's work to be done."

That work is happening every day at Place's William Paca Elementary, where a minor debate has broken out over the mural painted on the facade of the building, the one that overlooks a street with a couple of boarded-up rowhouses. It reads "Empowering Our Students to Take Over the World."

"The teachers say 'the world' is just not big enough," explains Place, her eyes glimmering with pride. "They think it should say 'the universe.'" **B**

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